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AUTHOR Torkelson, Kris
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ABSTRACT

Information from a survey of temperament and learning styles was used with International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) at the University of Minnesota in an ITA development course to enhance their communication skills and teaching abilities. The study used the Keirsey Temperament Sorter, a condensed version of the Myers-Briggs Temperament Inventory, with 35 ITAs and compared their responses with the general population of Americans who have taken the survey. All the ITAs were from Asian cultures and were temporarily in the United States for graduate study. The results indicated that over 65 percent appeared introverted and more than 90 percent preferred working with concepts and ideas rather than with people. Using this information with the 35 ITAs in a development course, the participants responded well to the information and appeared to understand the American students' expectation for interaction with teachers. An exploration of the Asian philosophy of education shed light on cultural differences with Americans. Practical exercises for ITAs called "Thinking on Your Feet" were offered and assisted participants in improving their communication skills and strengthening their confidence. Extensive appendixes contain materials from the ITA development course. (JB)

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KRIS TORKELSON

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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# USING IMAGINATION TO ENCOURAGE ITAs TO TAKE RISKS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The ideal ITA (International Teaching Assistant) is a highly motivated, self-directed student who goes out and purposefully interacts with native speakers of English in order to be in novel situations where creative responses are required. However, depending on what stage of the acculturation phase the ITAs are in, most would prefer to stay within their own culture by not interacting with native speakers. Their only exposure to Americans is kept to a minimum amount of time in the classroom after which they live out the balance of their day in their native language with their spouse and/or friends. What is the cause of this and what is the remedy?

To answer that question, I have six points which I want to present. First, I will show the two inventories on temperament and learning styles which I used with 35 of my ITA students at the University of Minnesota. Second, I will show the benefits of using these instruments with ITAs at the beginning of the U of M's ITA Development course. Third, I will explain how I tell the ITAs their individual strengths and weaknesses according to the inventories. By showing the results, I stress they need to become more interactive. Fourth, some explanation will be given as to why, for Asians, this is a weakness from a cross-cultural perspective. Fifth, a closer look will be given to what American undergraduates expect and how ITAs can better use nonverbal communication to aid their verbal skills.

Finally, I will provide some practical examples of how I use "Thinking on Your Feet" exercises which help ITAs in order to think quickly in response to impromptu questions. This also gives them practice in restating questions, "buying time" in order to think of an answer to "off-the-wall" questions. By using a one minute time limit, the goal is to keep the answers concise.

## II. DATA and METHODOLOGY

### A. Keirsey Temperament Sorter and Kolb's Learning Style Inventory

The Keirsey Temperament Sorter is from the book Please Understand Me [1], a condensed version of the Myers-Briggs Temperament Inventory. The ITAs take the Kiersey inventory which has only 70 questions and it takes about10-15 minutes to complete. Some of the

[1]Keirsey, D. & Bates, M. (1984). Please Understand Me. Gnosology Books Ltd.

phrases are culturally bound such as "head in the clouds", "in a rut" or "hunch" and ITAs may need some explanation ahead of time about their meanings. (This is a good chance for them to add to their vocabulary of idioms.)

The following table shows how the 35 ITAs who took the Keirsey Temperament Sorter compare with the general population of Americans that have taken this same inventory. For the purpose of this study, if the students scored evenly on both the **introvert/extrovert** (I or E) scale I put them in the "I" category. The other categories are described as **sensing/intuitive** (S or N); **thinking/feeling** (T or F); and, **judging/perceiving** (J or P). For this paper I am only focusing on the first category of introversion and extroversion.

**TABLE 1**

**MBTI CATEGORIES - PERCENTAGE of GENERAL POPULATION**

**WITH NUMBER and PERCENTAGE of ITAs**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ISTJ - 6%<br>10 ITAs - 29% | ISFJ - 6%<br>5 ITAs - 14% | INFJ - 1%<br>5 ITAs - 14% | INTJ - 1%<br>2 ITAs - 6% |
| ISTP - 6% | ISFP - 6% | INFP - 1%<br>1 ITA - 3% | INTP - 1% |
| ESTP - 13% | ESFP - 13% | ENFP - 5% | ENTP - 5%<br>1 ITA - 3% |
| ESTJ - 13%<br>4 ITAs - 11% | ESFJ - 13%<br>2 ITAs - 6% | ENFJ - 5%<br>2 ITAs - 6% | ENTJ - 5%<br>3 ITAs - 9% |

As Table 1 shows, 23 out of 35 or 65% of the ITAs are marginally introverted or decidedly introverted as compared to 28% for the general population. Looking at the results of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI)[2] is even more revealing. This inventory of 12 rank order questions takes about 5 minutes to do. The first part is broken down into four categories. Twenty-eight ITA

[2]Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (1985). McBer and Company. 137 Newbury St., Boston, Massachusetts 02116, (677) 437-7080.

students out of the 35 surveyed had high scores in **Abstract Conceptualization** (AC) which is defined as an orientation "more towards things and symbols and less towards other people." Conversely, "High **Concrete Experience** individuals tend to be empathetic and 'people-oriented'." According to Table 2 not one of the 35 in the **CE** category. (Perhaps if American TAs in the hard sciences were given this test, they too would be high in AC.) The other two categories, **Active Experimentation (AE)** and **Reflective Observation (RO)** comprise the remaining seven ITA students.

**TABLE 2**

**Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Myers-Briggs)**
**Kolb's Learning Style Inventory**

| *Subject* | *Country* | *Field of Study* | *Keirsey* | *Kolb's Learning Style* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | *Part I* | *Part II* |
| 1 F | China | Mech. Eng. | XSFJ | RO | Assimilator |
| 2 M | China | Chemistry | ENTJ | AE | Converger |
| 3 M | China | Civil. Eng. | ENFJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 4 F | China | Math | XSFJ | AC | Converger |
| 5 M | China | Math | ENTP | AC | Converger |
| 6 M | China | Pharmacy | ISTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 7 M | China | Elec. Eng. | XSTJ | AC | Converger |
| 8 M | China | Chemistry | ESFJ | AE | Accommodator |
| 9 F | China | Bio-Chemistry | INFX | AC | Assimilator |
| 10 M | China | Math | ISTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 11 M | China | Chemistry | ISTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 12 M | China | Chemistry | XSXJ | AC | Converger |
| 13 M | China | Physics | ENTJ | AC | Converger |
| 14 M | China | Physics | INTJ | AC | Converger |
| 15 M | China | Physics | INFJ | AC | Diverger |
| 16 M | China | Civil Eng. | ESTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 17 M | China | Civil Eng. | XNFX | AE | Accommodator |
| 18 M | Taiwan | Civil Eng. | ISTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 19 F | Taiwan | Pharmacy | ISXJ | AC | Converger |
| 20 M | Taiwan | Chemistry | XNFP | AC | Converger |
| 21 M | Taiwan | Pharmacy | ISTJ | AC | Converger |
| 22 F | Taiwan | Sociology | ESFJ | AC | Converger |
| 23 F | Taiwan | Med. Comp. Sci. | ISFJ | RO | Assimilator |
| 24 M | Taiwan | Phy. Ed. | ESTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 25 F | Taiwan | Zoology | ENFX | AC | Assimilator |
| 26 M | Hong Kong | Economics | ISTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 27 F | Korea | Chemistry | EXTJ | AE | Converger |
| 28 M | Korea | Math | ISFJ | RO | Assimilator |
| 29 F | Korea | Math | INTJ | AC | Converger |
| 30 F | Korea | Math | INFJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 31 M | India | Chemistry | XNFJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 32 M | India | Elec. Eng. | INTJ | AC | Converger |
| 33 M | Malaysia | Elec. Eng. | XSTJ | AC | Converger |
| 34 M | Thailand | Dentistry | ESTJ | AC | Assimilator |
| 35 M | Japan | Economics | INFJ | AC | Assimilator |

The second aspect of Kolb's LSI includes four more terms. **Assimilators** are described in the following way: "This person, like the converger, is less interested in people and more concerned with abstract concepts..." **Convergers** are described as follows: "Research on this style of learning shows that Convergers are relatively unemotional, prefering to deal with things rather than people." Table 3 shows how many ITAs fell into one of these two categories.

**TABLE 3**

**Four Basic Learning Style types**

| Accommodator | Diverger |
|---|---|
| 2 - China<br><br>**N = 2** | 1 - China<br><br>**N = 1** |
| **Converger** | **Assimilator** |
| 7 - China<br>4 - Taiwan<br>2 - Korea<br>1 - Malaysia<br>1 - India<br><br>**N = 15** | 7 - China<br>4 - Taiwan<br>2 - Korea<br>1 - Japan<br>1 - Thailand<br>1 - Hong Kong<br>1 - India<br><br>**N = 17** |

Only three of the 35 ITAs who took the Learning Style Inventory are in the more "extroverted" categories of **Divergers**, "who are interested in people and tend to be imaginative and emotional" and **Accommodators**, who are considered to be "at ease with people..."

## III. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

### B. Benefits of using the two inventories

ITA students appreciate knowing their strengths and weaknesses as compared with other Americans. (See Appendix One on how the results from Kolb's LSI compares ITAs with Americans in the same academic fields.) When I show the ITAs their results they seem to like this special kind of attention and have indicated that it shows a relatively accurate profile of who they are as learners and persons. By recognizing each ITA's individual strengths, it is my hope that they develop a sense of personal worth. By showing that I understand they are going through the complexities of adjustment to a new culture, I try to build trust. I give the ITAs the Kolb's Learning Style Inventory along with the Myers-Briggs Temperament Sorter to encourage them to be something special in their attempts to learn from the ITA development course while still being uniquely themselves.

The results support what I already know to be true, they appear too reserved or inhibited as teachers in the classroom. As the second column in Table 2 shows, most of our ITA students are of Asian background. The Asian students have been trained to show emotional control, inhibition of self-expression and have a compulsive attention to detail which stifles action and spontaneity. As discussed earlier, the results indicate over 65% tend to appear introverted and more than 90% prefer working with concepts and ideas rather than with people. When I tell the ITAs that they need to be more outgoing as teachers, it is easier for them to understand the rationale behind interaction. When I explain why Americans see interaction as such an important educational concept, they have a better understanding of why I introduce certain exercises throughout the remainder of the ITA Development course.

During the first week when I administer the Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and Myers-Briggs Temperament Sorter to each ITA student, I discuss the results of both inventories in a tutorial, a one-on-one exchange. If these introverted types are going to be effective ITAs in the American classroom, they must recognize how to adjust to accommodate to this new situation. For many ITAs, a lot of their previous learning was based on retrieval of facts and figures, not on

the higher level thinking skills where interaction is expected. Later in the course, I challenge the ITAs to think in terms of asking interactive type questions that will in turn stimulate their students' thinking and responses.

In real life, the ITA's eventual audience will be the American undergraduate student. Where ITAs may be intelligent at problem solving theories and concepts in their own domain, they have (due to their poor language skills) created some difficulties for the undergraduate students trying to learn from them. While the American students are trying to understand the complex material they are presenting, there is the added complication of pronunciation problems. The ITAs may self-consciously know this and thus the communication barrier is further compounded when interaction is expected of them. In the Asian culture, such methods of class participation are rarely used resulting in the ITAs frustration of changing their mental model of what a good teacher is according to our western definition.

Despite the negative consequences of introversion, I believe there is a remedy. However, before the remedy can be applied, it is necessary to recognize that the basis of Asian introversion is more than just a language problem. Because of the results of my inventories I want to next explain, from a cross-cultural perspective, why Asians need to work more on interaction.

## C. A cross-cultural perspective on why Asians need to work on interaction.

Most of the ITAs' formal education has trained them in an Asian philosophy of education which is entirely different from what we know in the western world, most particularly in the U.S. Because Asian ITAs have a different definition of what a good teacher is and what a good student is based on their philosophy of education, they use strategies they think are successful for a learning situation. However, when students complain about their performance as teachers, they find that their strategies fail in the American undergraduate classroom.

The Asians, especially the Chinese, are known for their ability to memorize. Asian ITAs have endured a labyrinth of content-based achievement and aptitude tests in order to come to the U.S. to study. These students have shown great capacity to memorize large volumes of

knowledge in order to pass these conventional tests. They have built up contextual mental models in their given fields and have proven themselves to be experts at problem solving in their discipline. The Asian ITAs have skills they have had to employ from a very young age that are very different from what Americans are required to exhibit.

Piaget states that "development precedes learning." I believe we need to persuade the ITAs that they must change their ideas about the philosophy of education. We as teachers must be aware of the major differences and leaps they must execute in order to be successful teachers in the American classroom. Our task as facilitators deals with the affective realm in convincing ITAs that they have to compromise and adjust their belief system as to what a good teacher is and what a good student is.

Another one of our goals is to encourage and accept creative ideas. An effective facilitator has the ability to draw undergraduate students out and sharpen their awareness of their interests and skills. "Creativity " and "independence" are the most appropriate words to consider when in the American classroom. These two words seem to run counter to what Asian ITAs have been exposed to throughout their schooling. In many cases, they have difficulty with this creative process based on long-standing cultural norms and traditions. Their philosophy is to conform to the group by maintaining certain standards or criteria. They have not been encouraged to be independently creative. As a matter of fact, plagiarism is rife in China. There is no protection of new ideas with the patents or the copyright laws we adhere to in the U.S. Therefore, there is little economic incentive to be creative in expression.

In order for their worldviews to change, Asian ITAs have to work through culture shock. The longer ITAs have been in the U.S., the better able they are to grasp the concepts discussed here. ITAs who have been here for a longer time have observed for themselves and are more willing to accept the fact that the American way of teaching is very different from how they were taught and how they learned in their own countries. Within our TA English program we, as teachers, need to encourage ITAs to be creative in their approach to teaching especially in bringing in relevant examples to help teach abstract concepts.

## D. ITAs need to be aware of Americans expectations of interaction

All throughout primary and secondary education, American teachers tell students that contributing in class helps to improve their grade. Typically Asian ITAs have not had this experience, they do not like to participate and they would rather observe and let the teacher do all the talking. Introverted Asian ITAs have the most problems with class participation and those with severe language difficulties are the most problematic for ITA developers. As a teacher, I have to know how to get Asian students actively involved in learning by encouraging class participation and interaction. I believe that we as ITA developers need to do major philosophical revisions in our ITAs' thinking in order for them to understand that their cultural biases about good teaching will not win them points with the American undergraduates who may be unsympathetic to the international teaching assistant.

## E. Nonverbal communication can aid the ITA in interaction.

According to Toupin (1980),[3] the cultural norms for Asians, are characterized by the absence of verbal aggression and direct expression of one's feelings, and the avoidance of confrontation. These are personal qualities which are highly esteemed virtues in Asian society. Like westerners, Asians have invested a deep sense of meaning in nonverbal cues. For example, in some Asian cultures to exhibit eye-to-eye contact is considered shameful between strangers because only street women do that.

Margaret van Naerssen[4] offers a case scenario demonstrating the lack of non-verbal communication among teachers from mainland China :

> "There was very little eye contact between the professor and students in Chinese classes, except when the professor was at the blackboard, pointing to information at the board, and talking to and facing the class. One professor talked at length to the blackboard. During one lecture the professor talked/read the lecture to the upper right rear corner of the room and the students had their heads down over their notebooks taking notes/dictation. There were almost no

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[3]Toupin, E. (1980). "Counseling Asians: Psychotherapy in the context of racism and Asian-American history." American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. Jan. Vol. 50(1). p. 76-86.
[4]van Naerssen, M. (1984). "How is a Chinese Student Like a Thermos Bottle?" ED 249818 - ERIC Clearinghouse.

facial expressions indicating comprehension or incomprehension, agreement or disagreement, nor were nods used as positive feedback. The most common changes of facial expressions were occasional yawns."

It is no wonder that we have ITAs who try to emulate highly esteemed teachers from their own countries in our classrooms. They have not had the non-verbal communication which we take so for granted in our own teaching methods modelled for them. This example sums up the experience I had in two years of teaching EFL in China. When I would ask interactive questions and the students did not know the answer, all heads went down. No one would dare hazard a guess, all eyes were glued to their desks. The term "inscrutable Orientals" was very much alive in my teaching experience as I looked into their faces assuming they comprehended what I was talking about. However, when asked, they were too ashamed to answer because it was not what they had experienced from their own Chinese teachers.

## F. Practical helps in motivating ITAs to think quickly and speak confidently

In the following section I will provide practical ideas on how to motivate Asian ITAs to use better non-verbal skills through hand gestures, humor and eye contact in using personalized stories and anecdotes. The goal is to get the ITAs to take on the role of an actor and become more animated when telling a stories about themselves. I try to move them into more creative strategies by using what I call "Thinking on your Feet" exercises.

As a facilitator, I try to create a climate of creativity and use the one minute time limit for each impromptu talk to ease the pain of waiting for an answer that may not be forthcoming from less fluent or inhibited students. These exercises stretch ITA skills by presenting tasks that require novelty, ingenuity and imagination. They also build on group unity within our program's small classes of four students. There is security in a small number but I still do not use these exercises until half way through the course. I believe trust has to be built up among the members of the class before this can be successfully done. Hopefully this will get them to be more creative in responding to questions in a more relaxed manner in the real-life situation of the classroom.

The following two examples show the kind of honest answers that might result when using "Thinking on Your Feet" exercises. When I asked one of my students to answer what his most embarrassing moment was (No.14 of Appendix Three), he was quick to respond. His most embarrassing time happened in Taiwan as a physical education instructor when he was demonstrating an exercise. He went into a squat in front of about 40 students (most of them female), when his pants split. He reenacted the whole scene between the guffaws amongst the rest of his ITA classmates. He used the rest of his one-minute time limit to tell how he solved the problem of his split pants. Our class was unravelled with laughter for about five minutes thereafter.

Some stories do not have the same spirit of levity. One student from the People's Republic of China answered what his most dangerous experience was (No. 3 of Appendix Three) by telling his experience at Tianamen Square the night of the massacre, June 4, 1989. Even though it was two years later, he was reliving the memory as if it happened yesterday and trying to blink back tears. He had lost some of his Beijing University classmates to death or prison. He related how he feels very fortunate to be alive and studying in the U.S. Using these self-disclosure type questions is not without its risks. One way I try to allay the students' vulnerability is to tell them at the beginning that after they have each answered three or four questions, they can ask me any question they want.

ITAs of a lower level of proficiency in English may be able to discuss in great depth their feelings on certain issues and often have many opinions in their own native language that they are unable to express in English. The "Thinking on Your Feet" exercises at the end of this paper are presented with three levels of difficulty. The **Self-Description** and **Tell about...** exercises are the easier to speak on spontaneously, while the **What If** exercise is a bit more difficult. For the higher level ITAs, The Book of Questions [5] and other speech communication books are sources from which to adapt questions. For the most advanced ITAs philosophical issues, opinions and current events can be used.

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[5]Stock, G. (1985). The Book of Questions. Workman Publishing Company. New York, NY.

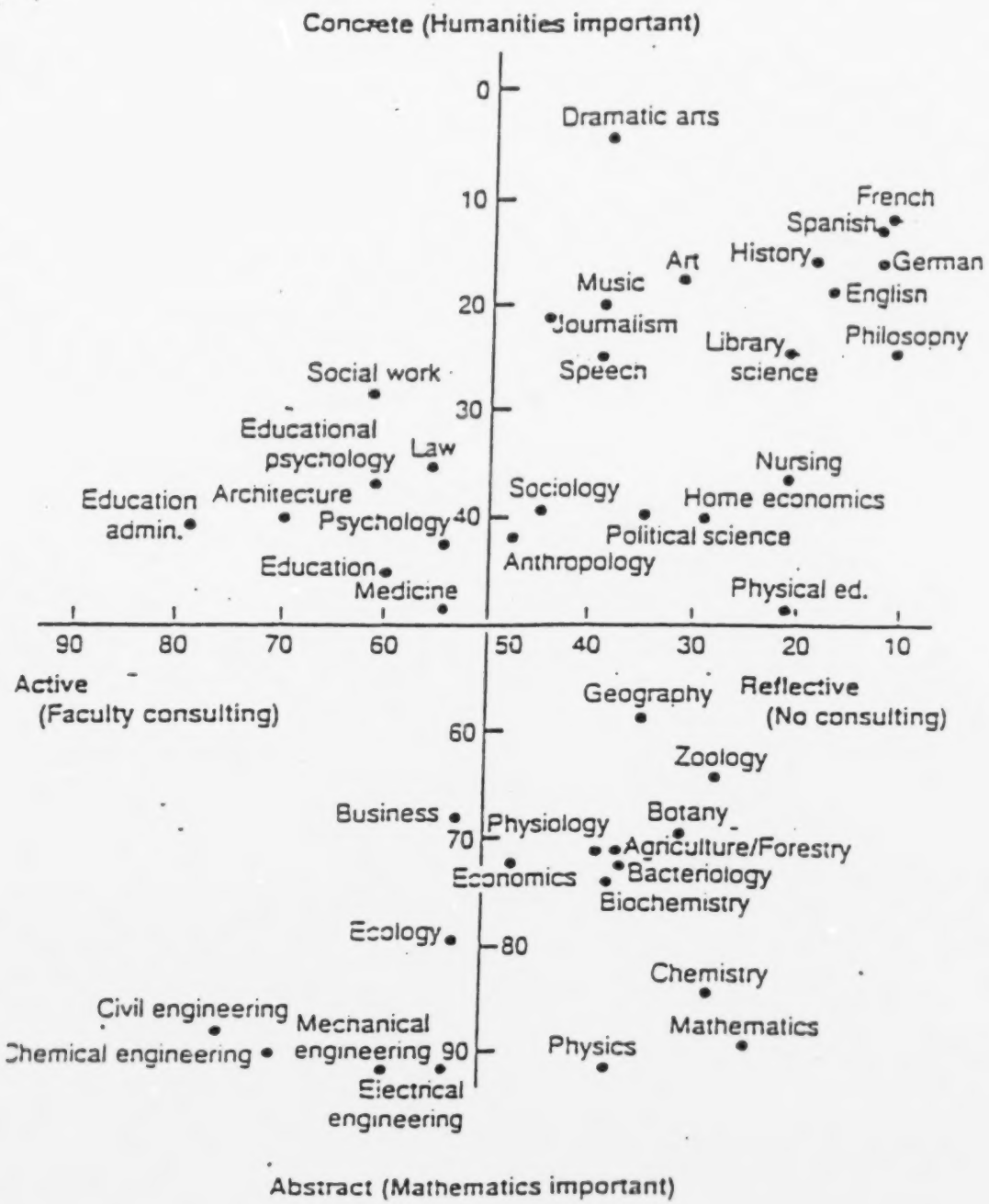
I have discovered that the ITAs look forward to this opportunity to learn from others' experiences each week at the end of the class. Students are reminded of their past by listening to others tell their stories. It awakens memories which are similar to their own experiences. The degree to which this skill of feeling comfortable in self-disclosure in the artificial environment transfers over to the real-life classroom, however, is a topic for more study. Hopefully these "Thinking on Your Feet" exercises would encourage creativity by bringing out relevant examples that relate to the abstract concepts and formulas which ITAs seem so proficient in talking about within their field of study.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The most important point of this paper is that we are asking highly introverted ITAs to do something that they would prefer to not do, which is to interact with Americans. This request is analogous to asking American students to memorize the U.S. Constitution with all its bylaws and amendments. It has been my experience in working with ITAs that motivation seems to be a given. The incentive is high to pass out of the ITA development program so they will be able to teach undergraduate students and take advantage of a tuition waiver. As teachers of ITAs we have to work at affirming their feeling of competence, once they have mastered the different methods and recognized the expectation to interact eventually with American undergraduate students. As a result of this new change in teaching styles, they need to build up confidence in interacting with Americans in a spontaneous and creative way. I believe the use of "Thinking on Your Feet" exercises can help in meeting that challenge as well as being fun to do.

## APPENDIX ONE

**Concrete-abstract and active-reflective orientations of academic fields derived from Carnegie Commission study of graduate students and faculty**



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## APPENDIX TWO

### Self-Description

1. Tell us about your most valuable possession.
2. Talk about your favorite pastime.
3. Talk about someone you respect and admire.
4. Talk about the things you think about the most.
5. Tell about your personal weakness.
6. Tell us about your greatest problem.
7. Tell us about your pet peeves.
8. Tell us about your character strengths.
9. Tell about what you think people like about you most.
10. Talk about a person you love.
11. Tell about your favorite relative.
12. Talk about the things that mean the most to you.
13. Talk about your favorite movie star.
14. Talk about your family.
15. Talk about the kinds of movies you like.
16. Talk about your favorite hideaway.
17. Tell about your favorite pet.
18. Talk about the things that make you happy.
19. Talk about a tradition in your country that is important to you.
20. Tell about something in your native country that you really miss.
21. Talk about the importance of money in your life.
22. Talk about the importance of religion in your life.

## APPENDIX THREE

Tell about...

1. a funny childhood experience
2. an important decision you had to/have to make
3. a dangerous experience you had
4. the last time you had an argument/fight
5. your first boyfriend/girlfriend
6. a time when you learned an important lesson
7. someone or something that changed your life or outlook on life
8. your pet peeves
9. an important tradition in your family
10. the greatest gift you have ever received
11. a time you were lost
12. an encounter you had with the police
13. a frightening dream you had
14. a time you were embarrassed by someone or something
15. your most frustrating experience

## APPENDIX FOUR

What If...

1. If you could be anyone in the world, who would you be?
2. If you could be doing anything right now, what would you want to do?
3. If you had been tall/short, how would your life have been different?
4. If you had been a fat/thin child, how would your life have been different?
5. If you were rich, how would your life be different?
6. If you could be any age, what age would you be?
7. If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you choose to live?
8. If you could have anything you wanted, what would you ask for?
9. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would that be?
10. If you could do one thing to change the world, what would you do?
11. If you had been born a man/woman, how would your life have been different?
12. If you had been born poor, how would your life have been different?
13. If you could bring one person back to life, who would that be?
14. If you could live forever, would you choose to do so?
15. If you could change one thing about someone else, who would you change and what would you change about that person?
16. If you could meet a famous person, who would you want to meet?
17. If you could live in any time period (past, present, future), when would you want to live?
18. If you could learn one skill, what would that be?
19. If you could create the perfect world, what kind of world would it be?
20. If you could create the perfect mate, what kind of person would that be?
21. If you had three wishes, what would you ask for?